DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 343 UD 035 359

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TITLE	School Attendance Revisited: A Study of Urban African American Students' GPA and Coping Strategies.
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (East Lansing, MI, April 6, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Attendance Patterns; *Black Students; *Coping; *High School Freshmen; *Psychological Patterns; Secondary Education; *Student Attitudes; Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the degree to which at-risk, urban, African American high school students' coping strategies and grade point average (GPA) would predict attendance. Data were collected from 100 high school freshmen using the Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences. Students' GPAs were identified through school records. Results indicated that students' academic performance and coping strategies significantly predicted a significant degree of the variance in attendance. Students who had lower GPAs, who used avoidance less often as a means of coping, and who used social support more often as a means of coping had higher levels of absenteeism. Students who attended school more frequently tended to have high cumulative GPAs, report the use of avoidance as a means of stress reduction, and use social support more often than did those who did not. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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Running head: Urban Adolescents

School Attendance Revisited:

A study of urban African American students' GPA and coping strategies

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Poster Presentation at the

American Psychological Association Division 17

(Counseling Psychology)

Great Lakes Conference 2002

Michigan State University

East Lansing, MI

April 6, 2002

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School Attendance Revisited:

A study of urban African American students' GPA and coping strategies

Abstract

One challenge facing Counseling Psychologists serving as change agents in urban school educational reform is absenteeism. This poster presents the results of a study examining the degree to which students' coping strategies predict attendance. Urban African American freshmen high school students who tended to have lower GPAs, used avoidance less often as a means of coping (use of substances as a way to escape—food, alcohol, smoking, caffeine, etc.), and used social support (efforts to stay emotionally connected with other people through reciprocal problem solving and expression of affect) more often as a means of coping with stress were found to have higher levels of absenteeism. In other words, those students who attended schools most frequently tended to have high cumulative GPAs, use avoidance less often as a means of coping, and use social support more often than those who did not. Implications for educational reform, school counseling service delivery, and future research are discussed.

School Attendance Revisited:

A study of urban African American students' GPA and coping strategies

Rationale

The challenges experienced by children within the urban communities are well-documented in the literature and mainstream media. Poverty, crime, limited availability of and access to role models for life success, and unemployment have consistently been noted and highlighted as points of intervention to increase the probability of optimal levels of life success in these communities. Nevertheless, in spite of these ongoing social ills within these life settings, success stories continue to prevail. Such environments continue to produce individuals who proceed academically to undergraduate and graduate level degrees at predominantly White institutions and professional accomplishments that exceed many from much more economically fortunate family and community backgrounds. Though there is a growing body of literature that examines these within group differences acknowledging this phenomenon, more information is needed that might better guide intervention efforts. The purpose of this study is to identify the person variables that are associated with attendance to better understand how students in these settings effectively cope with the environmental factors that would serve as deterrents to attendance for most. If coping strategies can be associated with attendance, then strategies might be taught to all students to increase the probability of attendance, which is critical to academic success.

The purpose of this study is to examine the degree to which urban African American students' GPA and coping strategies predict attendance. Implications for educational reform, school counseling service delivery, and future research are discussed.

School Attendance Revisited:

A study of urban African American students' GPA and coping strategies

Introduction

A number of researchers over the decades have identified what have become known as a syndrome of problem behavior in adolescence (Donovan, Jessor, & Costa, 1988; Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, & Costa, 1995). Problem behaviors are socially defined by norms of conventional society as undesirable for adolescents to engage in and involve the possibility of negative social sanctions (Donovan, Jessor, & Costa, 1988), and empirical study of the syndrome has consistently found strong, positive correlations among well-defined 'problem-behaviors' (i.e., school delinquency, substance abuse/use of illegal drugs, delinquent behavior, and precocious sexual intercourse, smoking cigarettes, marijuana use, problem drinking, etc.) and strong, negative correlations with behaviors that have been identified as acceptable and conventional by general society in which adolescents 'should engage' (i.e., school attendance, academic progress, church attendance) (Bachman, O'Malley, & Johnston, 1980; Donovan & Jessor, 1985; Donovan, Jessor, & Costa, 1988; Hundleby, 1987).

In response to this conceptualization of this "adolescent behavior problem syndrome", clinician and researchers have attempted to identify specific strategies for prevention and intervention that will lead to more positive or socially sanctions behaviors on the part of adolescents and consequently more outcomes for their lives. This focus of research has led to the identification of 'protective factors', which are defined as factors that will decrease the probability of adolescents engaging in problem behaviors (Luthar, 1993; Rutter, 1987). Jessor et al (1995), a leader in this area of interest noted a number

of factors that should serve a protection for adolescents. The following are a few of those: direct personal or social controls against its occurrence (i.e., strong religious commitment or predictable parental sanctions); involvement in activities that ten to be incompatible with or alternative to problem behavior (e.g., family and church activities); orientations toward and commitments to conventional institutions (e.g., schools). Garmezy (1985) organized protection variables into three categories: (a) dispositional attributes, or individual differences, such as high self-efficacy; (b) family attributes, such as parental support and affection; and (c) extra-familial circumstances, such as support from other adults, or strong community integration. Jessor, Turbin, and Costa (1998) identified two categories of protective factors: variables proximal to and directly implicating the engagement in healthy (personal orientation toward and commitment to heath and well-being); and, variables distal to and directly implicating of engagement in healthy, non-problematic behaviors, including personality, perceived social environment, and behavior variables that reflect an orientation toward and involvement with the conventional institutions of family, school, and church (e.g., religiosity, positive relations with adults, and participation in pro-social activities such as family activities, school clubs, and volunteer work).

> In a longitudinal, empirical study of high schools in large metropolitan districts, Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, and Costa (1995) and Jessor, Turbin, and Costa (1998) found that psychosocial protective factors did indeed appear to play an important role in the etiology and the developmental course of adolescent problem behaviors. Protective factors have been shown to relate both directly and

indirectly to adolescent involvement in behaviors that have been identified in the literature as social inappropriate for those within that stage of development.

However, not only has an empirical link been established between proximal and distal factors with behavioral outcomes, a theoretical/conceptual link exists as well: Problem-behavior theory (Jessor, Donovan, & Costa, 1991). This theory provides a frame that specifically addresses the psychosocial instigators (risk factors) and controls (protective factors) that regulate adolescents' and adults' deviation from conventional norms. Little work examining the psychosocial variables associated with appropriate adolescent behavior exists (Sussman, Dent, Stacy, Burton, & Flay, 1995), and that which does addresses on the highly proximal predictors (Lounquist, et al., 1992; Weiss et al., 1996), tends to use only very small samples of populations of college students and younger adolescents (Gillis, 1994; Lounquist, et al, 1992; Rivas Torres, & Fernandez, Fernandez, 1995; Weiss et al., 1996), and focus primarily on White youth (Donovan et al., 1991; Gillis, 1994). Though there has been a plethora of research with the intent of increasing understanding of the patterns of factors that influence adolescents' participation in positive behaviors, little is known and future research is strongly encouraged throughout the literature (Weiss, Larsen, & Baker, 1996).

The primary purpose of this study is in response to this call for future research having the intent to specifically examine the association between urban, African American high school absenteeism, one behavior that has been identified as being included in the set known as adolescent behavior problem syndrome, and

two distal intervenable variables that easily lead to implications for the development of effective interventions by school administrators, school teachers, and school counselors: academic performance and individuals' use of coping strategies. The authors believe that the following points justify the focus of this current study: the unique challenges (i.e., poverty, violence, drugs, limited role models, crime, unemployment, etc.) within urban communities that do not exist to the same degree as in other populations; the distinctive cultural norms that exist within these settings; the significantly higher rates of academic attrition and failure; and, the current existence of numerous ineffective programs having the objective to rectify the problem. It is hypothesized Black high school students' absenteeism will be associated significantly with academic ability, as measured by cumulative grade point average, and how each individual student coping with the unique challenges that exist within the urban school and community setting.

Method

Parental consent was received for 200 Black urban high school freshmen in a high-risk district for poverty, unemployment, and crime. Freshmen were selected given a 50-60% attrition rate over a 4-year period found at this level and the school's and the researchers' concerted effort to identify points of intervention to increase attendance. Participants (n=100) completed the Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (Patterson & McCubbin, 1983), a measure of coping styles. Participants' number of absences and GPAs were identified through the school records at the time of data collection. Pearson product correlations will be performed to examine the relationships between each of the coping strategies and number of absences. A multiple

regression analysis will be performed to identify the degree to which the criterion variable (number of absences) is predicted by the independent variables (coping strategies).

School Setting

The school (population=1100) and surrounding community were predominantly African American and located in a high-risk district for poverty, unemployment, and crime. The current attrition rate for the ninth grade ranged from 55% to 65% over a 5-year period. The purpose of the researcher-school collaboration was an attempt to examine the factors that might be intervenable by the high school counselors and teachers to assist the students in attending to their emotional and psychological needs.

Measures

Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences. The Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE; Patterson & McCubbin, 1983) is a coping inventory designed to identify the behaviors adolescents find helpful in managing problems or difficult situations. The normal developmental tasks of adolescents center on the search for identity, both as part of a group and as individuals, with attention focused on physical, social, and psychological aspects of self. The need to develop enough independence from one's family, to discover one's separateness and uniqueness, frequently creates an atmosphere of conflict in the family. The 95 items were grouped conceptually into the following patterns for coping: a) ventilating feelings (expression of frustrations and tensions such as yelling, blaming others, saying mean things, and complaining to friends or family), b) seeking diversions (efforts to keep busy and engage in relative sedate activities, such as sleeping, watching TV, or reading, as a way to escape

from or forget about the sources of tension and stress), c) developing self-reliance and optimism (directing efforts to be more organized and in charge of the situation as well as to think positively about what is happening to him or her), d) developing social support (efforts to stay emotionally connected with other people through reciprocal problem solving and expression of affect), e) solving family problems (use of communication with family members and following family rules to minimize conflict), f) avoiding problems (use of substances as a way to escape—food, alcohol, smoking, caffeine, etc.), g) seeking spiritual support (religious behaviors), h) investing in close friends (seeking closeness and understanding from peers), i) seeking professional support (getting help and advice from a professional counselor or teacher about difficult problems), j) engaging in demanding activity (engaging in challenging activities that allow achievement toward a goal such as strenuous physical activity, improving oneself, or working hard on schoolwork), k) being humorous (not taking the situation too seriously by joking or making light of a situation), and l) relaxing (to reduce tension by engaging in activities such as daydreaming, listening to music, or riding around in a car.). Each coping strategy is represented in a subscale with an individual score. The instrument is based on the premise that adolescents will use more than one style of coping with day-to-day problems. Completion time is approximately 10 minutes.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and ranges of absenteeism, GPA, and each of the A-COPE subscales. Pearson product correlation coefficients indicated that Absenteeism was significantly related to: GPA ($r = -.64$; $r = .000$) and the use of avoiding problems as a means of coping ($r = -.42$; $r = .002$). Results indicate that greater

absenteeism was associated with lower grade point average and more limited use of avoidance as a means of coping with day-to-day stress. No other significant relationships were found between absenteeism and the other variables.

Table 2 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis with absenteeism as the criterion variable and the cumulative GPA and the 12 coping style scores as the independent variables. Approximately 56% (r squared = .56; p = .000) of the variance in absenteeism was significantly influenced by this set of independent variables. The use of social support as a means of coping with stress (p = .03) was the significant positive contributors to absenteeism; and, the use of avoidance as a means of coping with stress (p = .004) and grade point average were the significant negative contributors to absenteeism. Urban African American freshmen high school students who tended to have lower grade point averages and used avoidance less often as a means of coping (use of substances as a way to escape—food, alcohol, smoking, caffeine, etc.), and used social support (efforts to stay emotionally connected with other people through reciprocal problem solving and expression of affect) more often as a means of coping with stress were found to have higher levels of absenteeism.

Discussion

The finding from this study of urban, Black high school students' absenteeism supported the authors' initial hypothesis. Academic performance and coping strategies were found to significantly predict a significant degree of the variance within attendance. Though the association between cumulative grade point average was of little surprise to the authors, nor probably to the readers, there is some note of caution in interpreting this particular set of findings. Given the correlational nature of multiple regression results, it

is impossible to distinguish if students who are better academically prepared based on teacher expectations (GPA) have fewer absences or if students who have fewer absences tend to be more academically competent as indicated by higher grade point averages. Regardless of the direct of the prediction, it would appear critical that education reform programs seriously consider the importance of academic remediation throughout K-12. Many of the students who participated in the study were found to have reading and math skills that were significantly below that of grade level. Consequently, it would be reasonable to conclude that many students may, in fact, not attend school as often if they were not able to understand the content, nor have positive success experiences in attending to teachers' assignments. School, may instead, serve as a place of continued and increasing probability of failure experiences with each passing year as academic expectations tend to become more complex and more challenging.

Aside for this point, however, the direction of the coping strategies that were positively associated with absenteeism was not in support of prior empirical findings with other populations. The use of social support as a means of coping has been consistently identified throughout the literature as critical to coping with stress. Making efforts to stay emotionally connected with other people through reciprocal problem solving and expression of affect in this setting was found to have a inverse relationship with engagement in another healthy, non-problem behavior: school attendance. What may be good in reducing stress for others in different community school settings, may result in a negative outcome that in this case would be detrimental to short and long term educational goals. It appears that though it may be useful and effective to use social support in this manner as a means of managing stress, it may be very important from

whom the support is received for Black, urban high school students. Teachers, parents, and counselors may note this finding as a need for adult structuring of activities that will allow engagement in healthy social support activity that will increase the probability of attendance, instead of leaving it to the students to structure such 'sharing' activities with those who may have the opposite outcomes. The authors also note that typically high school students do not choose 'skip' classes alone, but others who have made the same decision, who are also there source of 'support' or 'sharing'. If these are the primary individuals with whom there is an experience of stress relief, then, mutual reinforcement in absenteeism may become a pattern of stress relief as well. Particularly given the earlier explanation of the existence of the strong negative relationship found between grade point average and absenteeism wherein school itself may be experienced as one more additional source of stress.

Another possible intervention that is more individualistic in nature, is the teaching of all students to become selective with primary associations who will positively reinforce engagement in healthy behaviors that have positive, long-term consequences. Peer pressure is a major challenge for this population and guidance in decision-making and problem-solving about the effective use of all resources available toward the best outcomes would seemingly be beneficial.

The other point of surprise in the direction of the findings was the positive association between the use of Avoidance as a means of coping with stress and absenteeism. Students who attended most often were those who actually reported the use of substance (i.e., food, caffeine, snacks, alcohol, smoking, etc.) as a means of stress reduction. This finding certainly warrants special attention in that it once again appears

to be a means of coping that may be detrimental to adolescents' long-term physical health, even though engagement in such activities may result in increased school attendance. The early formation of healthy behavioral practices such as eating healthy foods, avoiding high caffeine and nicotine, avoiding alcohol as a means of coping, etc not only benefits health, but contributes to the delay or prevention of major causes of premature disability and mortality in adulthood-heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer (Adeyanju, 1990; Sallis, 1993). If use of substance is a significant means through which students are managing current stressors in their day to day life, though the short term outcomes may be positive, they may come at a much longer-term cost to health.

The direction of both of the coping strategies association support the notion that the experiences within urban school settings such as that described in this study warrants special attention. It appears that 'good' behavior, such as seeking support for stress management may have a 'bad' outcome; and bad behavior, such as the use of substance; may have a 'good' outcome'. Those working with adolescents in such settings must be very much aware of the possibility of different reinforcement principles that may function within adolescent development within urban communities that do not parallel those in other student populations or communities. There is a need for not only increased awareness, but also the identification of effective systemic, small group, and individual counseling strategies for intervention.

Finally, the overall finding could assist school counselors to more readily help students that might not be called into their office for any other reason besides absenteeism. The attendance issue could serve as a catalyst for counselors to delve deeper into a student's life situation, making the counseling process much smoother and

more comfortable. If counselors were informed as soon as serial absenteeism begins and immediately intervene, long-term, adolescents' negative academic consequences, such as academic failure and attrition, in urban settings may be significantly decreased. In addition, if the elementary schools provided a counseling unit structure wherein intervention for prevention highlighting healthy coping strategies that were identified as effective in leading toward academic persistence and achievement, these authors believe that the probability of positive outcomes would increase significantly in urban schools.

Limitations of the Findings

1. All measures used in this study were self-report and therefore may only reflect what the individuals wished to relay and not what is their actual belief or practice.
2. The results may not be generalizable to all other urban high school populations given the clearly defined community setting and description of the school, this is particularly true given the limited sample size, the collection of data only at one particular school setting, and the focus on only the freshman class.
3. The sampling process for participants was somewhat haphazard in that only attenders at the time of data collection completed packets. Consequently, these results may only reflect gender differences among those who attended during that time period and little may be known about non-attenders who may be more or less diverse.

4. Only 56% of the variance could be explained by the model, and there were variables that influenced the remaining 44% that were not examined in this study (i.e., parental involvement and concern).

Future researchers are strongly encouraged to attend to these limitations in efforts to more clearly identify the influences of both proximal and distal factors in Black urban adolescent high school students' engagement in healthy behaviors. In addition, findings mandate the necessity of empirical research that will lead to specifying healthy coping styles that will result in healthy outcomes for this population.

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Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges of Absenteeism, Cumultive GPA, and A-COPE Subscales.

	Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
	Absenteeism	23.77	28.30	0 – 128
	GPA	1.53	1.06	0 – 3.83
A-COPE	Profession Support	3.22	1.61	1 – 10
	Use of Humor	6.41	2.19	2 – 10
	Use of Friends	7.33	1.97	2 – 10
	Spiritual Support	7.94	2.54	3 – 15
	Demanding Activity	13.29	3.61	4 – 20
	Relaxation	13.59	2.34	7 – 20
	Family Support	17.30	4.84	7 – 30
	Social Support	17.38	4.38	6 – 29
	Ventilating Emotion	17.59	3.07	9 – 28
	Avoidance	18.13	3.61	7 – 24
	Self-Reliance	19.69	4.26	7 – 30
	Diversion	25.74	5.19	8 - 39

Table 2.

Significant Results of Multiple Regression Analysis With Absenteeism as the Dependent Variable.

Variable	B	SE B	Beta
Avoidance	-1.54	.53	-.23
Social Support	1.04	.49	.19
GPA	-17.43	2.05	-.65

Note. All variables entered. r squared = .56, F = 9.44.

P = .000.

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